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Doing ethnography from within a constructivist paradigm to explore virtual communities in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Most of the studies in the recent literature focus on the method used but not the philosophy behind it. This article focuses on doing ethnography, from within a constructivist paradigm, to explore individuals' participation in virtual communities in Saudi Arabia. An aim of this article is to highlight how particular ethnographic techniques, viz unobtrusive observation and participation, were used in that study. The article argues that doing ethnography in this way allowed for placing the results within the social and cultural context of Saudi society. The article, which includes a sample of the findings from the two techniques involved for illustration, concludes that the one-year unobtrusive observation and the eight months' participation in two different but similar virtual communities, during the period 2001-2002, have produced findings that are deep, meaningful and rich in description.

Keywords

Ethnography; constructivist paradigm; constructivist ethnography; unobtrusive observation; NVIVO; virtual communities; Saudi Arabia; Saudi women

Introduction

In 2002, an extensive study of the use of virtual communities for social purposes in Saudi Arabia was completed. It was undertaken by an Arab man who lived in Saudi Arabia for a long time and is therefore very knowledgeable about the culture and the way of life of the society where he grew up. His curiosity about virtual communities grew when he visited Al-Saha Al-Siyasia (by far the most widely spread forum in Saudi Arabia these days) in 2000 and interacted with some of its members. Today, the number of people who use virtual communities in the country is in the order of hundred of thousands. Although the Internet in Saudi Arabia is subject to strict government control, virtual communities have never been subject to any form of censorship. This has allowed males and females in this conservative society to talk to

each other in ways not previously possible. In a country where religion is taken very seriously this social change should be considered phenomenal.

There are a number of interesting issues that could arise in this new situation, particularly in relation to the off-line lives of Saudis. For example, will participation in virtual communities by Saudi women who make up 45% of the Internet users in the country (AlZaharni, 2002), become a way around long established customs that prevent them from having casual conversations with unrelated males (Wheeler, 2000; AlMunajjed, 1997)? Since men and women can be observed talking to each other online, will they talk to each other offline as a result of their communication online? While slander and obscenities are common in virtual communities in general (Kollock and Smith, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999), will these become common in Saudi virtual communities? While this article includes a brief discussion of some of these questions, its main focus is on the method used and the paradigm chosen.

Lack of studies on virtual communities in Saudi Arabia inspired this research. It was further encouraged by the apparent lack of studies of virtual communities being conducted in the Arabian Gulf countries and the other Arab countries as Western researchers have noted (e.g., Ess, 1998). Moreover, with the exception of Al-Farim (2001) and Wheeler (2003, 2001, 1998), there is a paucity of studies that have addressed the Internet in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general. The impact of virtual communities on people's off-line lives is seriously under-researched even in the Western world (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001; Jones and Kucker, 2001).

There are many discussions in the literature (Preece, 2005; Preece, 2000; Jones and Kucker, 2001; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999) of what constitutes a virtual community. For the purpose of this article, virtual communities are defined as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000: XX). It should be noted that the virtual communities that are examined in this study used an "asynchronous" rather than a "synchronous" mode of communication- where participants interact in delayed time, that is, without everyone gathering at particular time.

Most of the studies in the recent literature focus on the method used but not the philosophy behind it. The emphasis of this article is on the use of both, viz the method, ethnography, and its philosophical underpinnings, the constructivist paradigm. The focus is also on two key ethnographic techniques, namely unobtrusive observation and participation, which were used to collect the data, including the selection and descriptions of the settings and the gaining of entry to them. After a description of the data analysis, the article presents a sample of the findings for illustration purposes. The findings in this article relate to the main characteristics of participation in virtual communities in Saudi Arabia and have been obtained using the techniques of unobtrusive observation and participation. The findings from another technique, the interviews, are included in previously published articles (e.g., Al-Saggaf, 2004). Finally, the article offers some conclusions regarding the value of the method for research focusing on virtual communities.

The choice of the constructivist paradigm

The main aim of the study was to explore individuals' participation in virtual communities in Saudi Arabia. Since it was important to place the results of the study within the social and cultural context of the Saudi society, the interpretivist approach (which is associated with qualitative research methods) seemed most appropriate. Interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed and situated and is therefore relative to a specific context. They also consider understanding the perspectives and meanings that people individually construct about their situations essential (Williamson, 2002). Another reason for choosing the interpretivist framework is because a secondary aim of this study was to learn about individuals' experiences and their perceptions about the effect of their participation on their off-line lives. This secondary aim was achieved through the use of semi-structured interviews, discussion of which, as mentioned above, will not be reported here.

One of the popular paradigms that come under the interpretivist approach is called the constructivist paradigm. In terms of its ontological assumptions, this paradigm argues that the reality about a particular social phenomenon is multiple and constructed. Constructivists believe that there is no single objective reality "out there" about a particular phenomenon; instead, there are multiple realities constructed in the minds of the people under study. In terms of its epistemological assumptions, this paradigm argues that the investigator and respondent co-create understandings and thus, when reporting their findings, researchers tend to acknowledge their subjectivity. Researchers also tend to accept that they themselves influence the research process and, for this reason in their report, they also reflect on their own roles (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). In terms of its methodological assumptions, constructivists believe that they should study the phenomenon in the field where it occurs, because they recognise the importance of understanding the cultural practices of the people and the meanings they bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 21). Schwandt (1994: 128) believes that research carried out within a constructivist paradigm is very similar to naturalistic inquiry as outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985). Naturalistic inquiry, for example, favors qualitative (interpretivist) methods because they are more suitable to dealing with the multiple realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 40). In naturalistic inquiry, the process of research is interactive and the knower (inquirer) and the known are inseparable from each other. The inquirer 'prefers to negotiate meaning and interpretations with the human sources from whom the data is drawn because it is their realities that the inquirer seeks to reconstruct' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 41).

The constructivist paradigm encompasses two key constructivist theories. The first, personal construct theory, was first described by Kelly (1963) and emphasizes individual reality or interpretation of the world. The second, social construct theory, major proponents of which were Berger and Luckmann (1967) emphasizes the influence of society, culture, and social environment on reality. Personal construct theory argues that people construct the reality about their world individually and that is why reality about a phenomenon is not single but multiple, existing in the minds of individuals (Charmaz, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Schwandt, 2000). Every person constructs his/her reality about the world based on individual perceptions and every person perceives the world in a way that could be different from another person's perception of it (Saule, 2002; Hammersley, 1995; Kelly, 1991; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, while the meanings derived from events, persons, objects (in order to make sense of, or organize, them) are constructed realities, persons and objects in the constructed view are considered tangible entities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 84).

The social construction of reality theory argues that meaning is developed through the interactions of people and things like, language, culture, environment and religion (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Social constructionists recognise the importance of language, culture, and environment to the way people make sense of their world (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Williamson (2002: 30) says “Social constructionists see people as developing meanings for their activities together, that is, they socially construct reality”. This means that, in the social construction of reality, people construct their reality together. According to Schwandt (1994: 127) the social construction of reality does not focus on “the meaning-making activity of the individual mind, but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by conventions of language and other social processes”.

The literature shows that research on virtual communities has benefited from both constructivist theories (e.g., Markham, 2005; Manaszewicz, Williamson and Mckemmish, 2002; Dodge and Kitchin, 2001; Costigan, 1999; Fernback, 1999). In the often cited book, *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, Jones (1998: 5) states that the Computer Mediated Communication medium does not create the social reality about the virtual community, it is the conversations and interactions that take place between people that constitute the reality. This backs up the point that Berger and Luckmann (1967) made about the reality being constituted, as mentioned above, through the interaction between social processes. With respect to the personal construction of reality, Fernback (1999) and Markham (1998) both concurred that participants construct their realities about the virtual community they belong to personally and that these realities exist in the minds of these participants, which means the reality about virtual communities is also multiple and constructed.

This study uses both theories as the lens through which virtual communities in Saudi Arabia are interpreted. Social constructionism was used to interpret the ways participants conducted themselves in relation to others and the ways the virtual community affected their behavior. Personal constructivism was used to understand how participants individually developed their sense of community and belonging to it. The Saudi society is a collectivistic society; religion and culture strongly influence how people behave, in general, and towards others, and also how they behave in ways that are similar from one person to another. Given that social constructivism is about how people develop their meanings together, this framework is more appropriate to the Saudi context than the other.

Constructivist ethnography

Ethnography can be carried out from within several frameworks such as post-modern and critical (Saule, 2002). The ethnography carried out in this study was from within a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists favour ethnography because it allows them to present the multiple realities as shared by the participants and also the alternative interpretations as they emerge from data (Fetterman, 1989). Ethnographers study people in their everyday contexts (Saule, 2002: 180) by participating in their daily social activities in order to observe and understand them (Minichiello et al., 1990: 18). Ethnographers use several techniques in their gathering of data such as interviewing, observation and document analysis. It should be noted that, while some researchers treat participant observation as a synonym for ethnography (Bow, 2002), in the present study participation is treated as a technique that could be used to collect data. It is expressed in this way in order to distinguish it from “participant observation” the method. The authors take the position of

distinguishing between the terms “technique” and “method”. The former should mean the specific procedures that are used to collect or analyse data. The latter should mean the general rules that govern the implementation of these procedures.

According to Saule (2002: 180-181), there are three implications for conducting ethnography from within a constructivist paradigm, all of which have been alluded to in the previous section. First constructivists accept that a theory cannot adequately and categorically explain the nature of a given phenomenon. That is, since reality exists only in the mind of each individual, and each individual's perception of what is real will differ from the perceptions of others, ethnographic interpretations of the reality will be multiple. Second, constructivists recognise that researchers cannot be objective and for this reason they make their potential influence on the interpretation of the phenomenon explicit in the ethnographic text, thus allowing the reader of the text to have an understanding of the researcher's background and position. Third, constructivists believe that it is only through the researcher's interaction with those being studied that the nature of social constructs can be elucidated. This is in line with ethnographic research since ethnographers are known for participating directly in the settings where the people and the activities under study coexist.

Data collection

Data were collected for this study using four ethnographic techniques. These were unobtrusive observation of a virtual community; a participant role by the researcher in another similar virtual community; online semi-structured interviews with regular participants; and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key informants. Findings obtained through these techniques were triangulated to assist in establishing the trustworthiness of the research results (Bow, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1987). This article focuses only on the participation and unobtrusive observation techniques. Ethics issues associated with these techniques are discussed below.

As an unobtrusive observer in the first community, the researcher ensured that the community's usual activities and natural behaviour were not affected (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000; Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, 2000). The researcher as an unobtrusive observer also ensured that distortions to the research findings were not introduced because of confusion over his role (i.e. member or researcher) (Glesne, 1999; Paccagnella, 1997). Additionally, not participating avoided the researcher becoming emotionally close to the participants and enabled him to concentrate on his observation. According to the literature, being an observer and a participant at the same time involves two distinct roles, which the researcher may not often accomplish successfully (Tedlock, 2000; North, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1987).

There are salient advantages from the researcher being a participant in a different, but similar virtual community. Becoming a participant in a community is the best way to understand its people (Suler, 1999). In the community where he was a participant, the researcher was able to network with the community members, engross himself in various situations and take part in the diverse community activities. This enabled him to understand, in depth, the culture of the community and gain insights into the perceptions of the community members. His participation also enabled him to report his perceptions about his own virtual experience, which is considered very important to the research findings according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), Markham (1998), Marshall and Rossman (1999) and Locke et al. (2000).

Using these techniques in this way brought the benefits of each to the study. The unobtrusive observation began first and was carried out over a twelve-month

period, from March 2001 until March 2002. The participation in the other community, with considerable efforts being made to ensure it was similar to the first one, began about six months later, and lasted eight months, from October 2001 until May 2002.

The unobtrusive observation - Setting and process

The virtual community selected as the research site for conducting unobtrusive observation was an asynchronous public discussion web-based forum located in one of the Internet service provider's websites in Saudi Arabia. The website began operations in March 1997 which is about two years before the Internet was officially introduced in the country. The forum itself, however, began receiving people from Saudi Arabia in 1999. From the observation of a few forums at the beginning of the study, this forum appeared to contain the largest concentrations of members, which implied, to some extent, that the range of participants' characteristics was diverse.

At the time of observation, the main page of the forum contained links to newly posted topics. Entries were organised by date beneath each other from newest to oldest. Small links on the main page could take users to even older topics that resided in other pages. Next to the title of a topic was the nickname of the author of the topic and a figure that showed the number of times the topic was read. When this number was large, it was observed that more readers become attracted to that topic, possibly because they thought it must be interesting or important.

As with the one chosen for the participant component, the forum was a public place where any one could join. There was no subscription fee and only a username and a password were required. Rigorous checking of the ethical issues related to researching virtual environments revealed that conversations in publicly accessible discussion forums are public acts deliberately intended for public consumption. Recording, analysing and reporting of such content, where individuals' identities are shielded, does not violate the ethics of conducting research in virtual environments (Ess, C. and AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002; Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Glesne, 1999; Paccagnella, 1997; Frankel, 1999; King, 1996). Eysenbach and Till (*ibidem*) said that to determine whether informed consent is required, a decision on whether postings to an Internet community are "private" or "public" communications has to be made. They add:

This distinction is important because informed consent is required 'when behaviour of research participants occurs in a private context where an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or reporting is taking place'. On the other hand, researchers 'may conduct research in public places or use publicly available information about individuals (such as naturalistic observations in public places and analysis of public records or archival research) without obtaining consent.' (quotations marks in original, n.p.)

It should be noted that an ethics approval for this study was granted from the Ethics in Human Research Committee at Charles Sturt University before the study commenced. The application for ethics approval was consistent with the standards for ethical research set by Charles Sturt University.

At the beginning of the research, between mid-March 2001 and mid-July 2001, the process of observation was a little unstructured. The researcher during this stage entered the forum regularly but with a broad view. He looked at events, activities, and behaviours that were salient in the forum and recorded his field notes in a journal. His observations were influenced by what was reported in the current literature on virtual communities (see Jones and Kucker, 2001; Preece, 2000; Rheingold, 2000; Kollock

and Smith, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Holmes, 1997; Jones, 1997; Turkle, 1995). The unstructured stage allowed the researcher to become familiar with the culture of the virtual community, its history, people, and the nature of their activities. During this stage also the researcher noted the prominent features in the community, and made a checklist of observational categories for use in the next stage. Table 1 sets out some these categories (order is not important).

<i>grouping</i>	<i>meeting offline</i>	<i>information sharing</i>	<i>religion</i>	<i>friendship</i>
<i>history</i>	<i>flaming</i>	<i>complimenting</i>	<i>disclosure</i>	<i>status</i>
<i>trivia</i>	<i>offline culture</i>	<i>humour</i>	<i>obscenity</i>	<i>love relationships</i>
<i>religious influence</i>	<i>shyness</i>	<i>defending friends</i>	<i>time spent</i>	<i>intimacy</i>
<i>respect</i>	<i>intellectual discussions</i>	<i>emotional support</i>	<i>commitment</i>	<i>family atmosphere</i>
<i>reputation</i>	<i>use of accent</i>	<i>misunderstandings</i>	<i>revealing real names</i>	<i>attention</i>

Table 1: Observational categories developed in the unstructured stage

In the structured stage, observations concentrated mainly on the categories, some of which are, listed above. In addition to recording the observations about the topics that were daily posted to the forum, the researcher also wrote his own reactions, reflections and interpretations about his observations. Doing this helped him deal with the issue of subjectivity (of a single observer) which he, at a later stage of the research, compensated by using triangulation with data from the other techniques such as interviewing. Comments that contained insights into the behaviour of participants or were simply interesting were copied and translated instantly in the same document.

Being a participant – Setting and process

To facilitate comparisons of data, the site where the researcher sought to act as a participant needed to be as similar as possible to the observed site. To achieve this, the researcher used a specialised search engine that listed most of the forums in the country (176 forums were located), and then selected some to observe for a while, comparing them with the site where he was undertaking the unobtrusive observation. He then joined two of them and participated for a few days before deciding which to choose. Then he stopped participation in one and continued with the other for the rest of the eight-month period of participation.

Once again the chosen site was an asynchronous public discussion web forum, free for anyone to join but requiring the provision of a password and a nickname for participation. The researcher followed a systematic approach where he first observed the community for a few days to familiarise himself with the members, their culture, their insider vocabulary and the nature of topics that were common in the forum. After a few days, he began replying to other participants' topics so that he could make sense of the people around him, get himself known to them, and also establish reciprocal relationships with members that may make them reply to his topics in the future. After a few days of doing this, he started to send his own topics to the forum.

In this setting, the researcher also recorded daily field notes in a similar journal to the one used in the silently observed forum but in this case they were about his own virtual experience (being a member) which included his reactions, reflections

and interpretations. Although it was unavoidable to observe while participating, he did not take observational field notes about other participants. However, as one of the tactics to validate the data collected from the observed community, he made comparisons between the two forums. The process of participation and the recording of field notes took two to three hours daily but on some occasions it took five hours, depending on the number of new topics and the volume of replies to the researcher's topics or to new topics posted by other participants.

As with the observed forum, comments that contained unusual language, startling statements, or interesting comments, were copied, translated instantly, and placed beneath the original text. All the comments copied were from topics in which the researcher had posted.

Analysis of Data

Data from the four different techniques, including the two discussed here, were analysed as they were collected. The daily observational and participation field notes were recorded in MS Word and saved as RTF documents, with a single document covering one week of field notes. For example, *Obsv_W2_03_05_05.doc* represents observational field notes collected in week two, starting 3 May 2005.

At the end of each week, this RTF document was imported into NVIVO (a software package for managing qualitative data.) for analysis. This means that the analysis of field notes was performed on a weekly basis. It should be noted, meanwhile, that analysis was iterative as the observational and participation documents were re-analysed as more data were gathered.

Observational and participation field notes were first read and then keywords (within each and every line) that encompassed certain ideas were marked. Next themes based on these keywords were developed and converted into nodes in NVIVO. In addition to the fact that these nodes represented the developed themes, they also stored all the data associated with a particular theme from all the weekly documents. In other words, these nodes became buckets or baskets inside of which content specific to a particular theme from all the weekly documents was placed. Finally came the further structuring or organising of nodes into groups and categories based on the general concepts of the research they addressed. This last step (the process of categorisation) was iterative, emergent and adaptive.

Sample of the Findings

The reality about virtual communities and the relationships within them

Most of the active members in the communities regarded their forums as "real" communities. Al-Anood, a female participant, who expressed her feelings towards the community and its members, made this point:

To the forum that I felt that it is part of my existence and felt towards its members the amiability and love, the thing that did not authorise me to write in any other forum, I approach you with all the gratitude and love. This forum is like the house that contains between its walls a people whose hearts are loyal and whose souls are fraternised [Observation journal, Week 15, 24 October 2001].

Another example that supports the above conclusion was when members explicitly used the word “community” to refer to their forums. Thamer, a male participant, who was explaining to another male participant how hard it was to leave the community, illustrates this:

The problem is that I am in love with this community. I [feel I] am one of its members. I adore it. And every time I tighten my saddlebag [meaning trying to leave], I find myself captivated, so I bring back my saddlebag. I just can't. And I find lots of people stop me [from leaving]. [Observation journal, Week 7, 18 May 2001]

Additionally, the researcher's own experience confirms this finding:

For a forum to be considered a community its members must perceive it, or construct a reality about it as a community. There are hundreds of members in the forum where I participate, but I only pay attention to 30 to 40 members. And among these 30 to 40 members there are about 10 members about whom I really care. To me the community exists only in my mind and it is composed of these 30 to 40 friends and the 10 close ones. This is my community; this is how I construct its reality. Similarly, forum members may perceive my community as their community or may construct a different reality about a different community from mine. This means that forum members may belong to different communities within the same forum. [Participation journal, Week 23, 13 April 2002]

Most of the active members also regarded their relationships, including those between males and females, as “true” and “genuine”. The following quotation, taken from a post by a male participant saying farewell to a female participant, illustrates this:

I was never convinced of the existence of brotherhoodⁱⁱ between man and woman particularly over the Internet and I have never written it [he was referring to the word ‘sister’] when I am talking to a female colleague but Allah testifies that I am now convinced of it through you. I do not believe that I have bridled [held back] paralysed unable to write, which is my sole hobby, except after I read your previous words and if it had not been for some false pride of the eastern man, tears which were crowded in my eyes would have fallen. [Observation journal, Week 24, 3 January 2002]

The above quotation suggests that relationships that remain solely online, that is between those who communicate only in the forum, are not only possible, but can be true and genuine. They can also become intimate as the following quotation taken from a message Hamid, a male participant, sent asking about the absence of a female friend:

[names omitted] ... your absence lengthened. And our longing for you is immense ... We yearn for the day that our eyes embrace what your hands write. So is this day coming soon? [Observation journal, Week 34, 28 March 2002].

The extension of the relationship from online to other settings

The participants in Saudi Arabian virtual communities, in addition to their online interactions in the forum, often used email, chat, and the MSN Messenger to privately communicate with each other. Soha, a female participant, when sharing her thoughts about a male participant who was leaving, mentioned that she talked with him on the MSN Messenger:

... it is true that I only know you through the forum and [a] few MSN conversations, but Allah is my witness that you were such a sincere brother. [Observation, Week 7, 15 May 2001]

Individuals appeared to have used these other communication channels to complement the forum. The use of other forms of communication such as private messages or the MSN Messenger by the virtual community members is similar to the use of the telephone and email by people in the offline world.

In addition to extending the relationship to other communication channels, most participants of the same gender often extended their relationships to the telephone or face-to-face mediums. Wafa, a female participant, while talking to another female participant, said: "Hey, looks like I won you over hahahahahahah [laughing] I will tell you why when we meet tonight ok!" [Observation journal, Week 5, 29 April 2001].

This extension of relationships to telephone or face-to-face suggests that virtual communities do not necessarily remain just online, but may even go to offline settings. It is important to note that, while male and female participants admitted to having communicated across their gender lines via email, chat and the MSN Messenger, there is not enough evidence that suggests that male participants have met face-to-face with females from the forum. The mixing of unrelated adults of the opposite sex is considered wrong in Islam, and Saudi society in particular does not approve or tolerate such an activity. For this reason, perhaps, participants did not admit meeting face-to-face with the opposite gender.

Meanwhile, data show that the extension of relationships to offline settings (among members of the same gender) made the relationship between participants grow deeper and stronger. Al-Wafi, a male participant, shared his feelings after his offline meeting with some participants from Jeddah:

[T]he sensational feeling I got after meeting you is difficult for the human being to describe or express, but I always repeat that it is the sense of belonging, yes, the sense of belonging towards something is a wonderful feeling which can give it its due justice. [Observation journal, Week 25, 12 January 2002]

Grouping

While the extension of relationships offline made the participants close friends, it also caused participants to form clusters (members called it "grouping"), which takes place when a group of participants forms a circle, support only themselves and abandon the rest. Many participants who have been victims of grouping, such as Omar, a male participant, expressed their dissatisfaction with grouping and repeatedly complained about it to the members of the forum:

To remain fit and prove yourself you need to join a group like [name omitted] ... but the thing is ... it is unfair ... I mean what is the fault of the newcomers who try to join the forum but can't find a place for themselves? [Observation journal, Week 4, 21 April 2001]

It appears that grouping was not simply based on common interests or common intellect, but more on the offline relationship that members had developed after they met and knew each other online. For example, the members of group X, who regularly met in Riyadh, differed in terms of intellectual capacity, style of writing and interests, yet they represented a strong cluster.

Meanwhile, the effect of this grouping on the community was immense. It seemed it had been a big problem for participants because it denied equal attention to those outside a particular group. While members of a group enjoyed many

advantages, such as a sense of strength and attachment, continuous support from the other members of the group and, more importantly, more replies to their topics, those who did not belong to a group were being disadvantaged. For instance, when a male member was involved in a “flame war” with another member who was not part of his group, the member of the group would insult or attack the external member and depend on his group members to defend him and “back him up”. The following quotation, which Baha (a male participant) wrote in defence of Samy (his male friend in the forum), illustrates this:

Be certain brother that what is between us exceeded a friendship that is on the forum, but it became a ... true friendship and a real one, full of love and affection. Be certain that we will not allow any person to deform your picture either in front of us or in front of any other creature [Observation journal, Week 33, 24 March 2002].

Obscene references

Another negative aspect of participation in virtual communities in Saudi Arabia was writing expressions that would be considered embarrassing to utter in the company of others. Here we are talking about expressions which are embarrassing to utter from the point of view of the Saudi culture and may not be considered obscene from a western society’s point of view. Consider the following quotation, which was taken from a post by Ahlaam, a thirty-four year-old unmarried woman who used “man” as a metaphor for sleeplessness:

And the ugly sleeplessness is still kissing me. I got used to his ugly and long kisses. And got used to what he brings with him to me. When he arrives he opens his hard arms to me. He hugs me and folds his arms around me. He kisses me and lengthens his kisses. I try to escape from his grip but I never once succeeded in that. Always he is the strongest and has the longest hand in pulling me toward him before I escape. [Observation journal, Week 24, 3 January 2002]

Although operators were strict about obscene or indecent references and frequently deleted such content, there were many incidents in which these things got through. Incidents like the above, especially when females are involved, leave the participants embarrassed and ashamed. It must be said, however, that obscene references do not often come from well-known and committed members because they often worry about their reputation, and their image in front of their friends. Obscene and undesirable practices come mostly from new members, unknown or irregular members. Furthermore, members generally feel pressured by the existence of older members, who enjoy the majority’s respect, to behave themselves and watch out for what they say.

Conclusion

Unobtrusive observation and participation have proven to be effective in researching virtual communities in Saudi Arabia. In addition to their low cost, speed of return, and ease of access to a wider geographical area and from the comfort of the researcher’s chair, it was clear that they enabled the researcher to provide findings that are deep and rich in description. Conducting unobtrusive observation and participation on two different, but similar, virtual communities avoided the researcher disturbing the observed community’s usual activities and natural

behaviour and introducing distortions to the research findings because of confusion over his role.

Conducting the study on virtual communities from within a constructivist paradigm enabled the researcher to explore these communities in their own cultural context. The lens of personal and social construct theories have proven to be useful for the understanding of the virtual communities under study. Social construct theory was useful for understanding how the members collectively behaved online. For example, this theory was useful for understanding why participants in general did not go against cultural values and meet with the opposite sex offline as a result of their communication in the virtual community. On the other hand, personal construct theory was useful for understanding the ways members individually constructed their sense of community and their perception of the presence of others. For example, this theory enabled the researcher (first author) to understand his own constructed reality about his own virtual experience and report his perceptions about it in the text.

Using a qualitative research method for this study guided by an interpretive framework also proved to be appropriate. Doing ethnography from within a constructivist paradigm enabled the conduct of unobtrusive observation and participation in ways which yielded results that are deep, meaningful and rich in nature. Had a quantitative research method been used, the findings would have been factual and superficial. The use of a survey by self-administered questionnaires, for example, for the research could not have provided the rich descriptions revealed by observation and participation.

Endnotes

- i The authors took the text within quotation marks from the American Sociological Association code of ethics document. (see American Sociological Association code of ethics, last updated 27 October 2002, accessed 5 April 2003, <http://www.asanet.org./members/ecostand2.html#12>)
- ii He means brotherly/sisterly relationships between males and females.

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